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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 005143

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/25/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [XF](#) [FR](#) [KMEPI](#)

SUBJECT: NEA/PI DIRECTOR ROMANOWSKI PROMOTES GREATER COOPERATION ON MIDDLE EAST REFORM DURING PARIS VISIT

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: NEA/PI Director Alina Romanowski stressed the need for greater complementarity and information sharing between U.S. and French efforts to promote reform in the Broader Middle East, during a July 18-20 visit to Paris. French officials were receptive to Romanowski's emphasis on complementarity, and reaffirmed GoF intent to concentrate on revitalizing the Barcelona Process vice BMENA initiatives. French officials also described positive shifts in the GoF approach to regional reform, with increased emphasis on good governance, though the GoF continues to favor cooperation with governments over civil society. French development officials were particularly candid in assessing shortcomings in the Barcelona Process, difficulties in implementing French assistance programs, and lack of GoF political will at the highest levels to push Arab governments toward reform. In a sign of increased French willingness to engage positively on reform issues, Romanowski was invited to address an MFA-sponsored annual conference on international development, serving alongside senior UNDP, EU, and GoF representatives in a panel discussion on reform efforts in the Middle East/North Africa. End summary.

DISCUSSION WITH MFA NEA A/S-EQUIVALENT THIBAULT

¶12. (C) During a July 18 meeting, MFA Director (A/S-equivalent) for North Africa/Middle East Jean-Francois Thibault agreed with Romanowski that the U.S. and EU shared common objectives in promoting reform in the region and that we should seek to make our mutual efforts more complementary. At the same time, Thibault stressed the need to preserve the independence of EU initiatives, as Europe had a special strategic relationship with the region. Romanowski reassured Thibault that the U.S. had no desire to take over EU initiatives and that we wanted to keep our reform efforts separate and complementary. Thibault agreed that better transparency and information could help identify gaps or redundancies between U.S. and European efforts. At the same time, he observed that the GoF hoped to convince the U.S. that its approach was right in focusing more on governments than civil society.

¶13. (C) Romanowski, Thibault, and MFA action officer for BMENA issues Brigitte Curmi compared notes on U.S. and French approaches on education, particularly in the Maghreb. Thibault noted that some 40 percent of French development aid in the North Africa/Middle East region was devoted to education, with spending concentrated on Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Algeria had made disastrous mistakes in dismantling its French-Arabic bilingual education system in the 1970's, to the extent that students spoke neither language well. Morocco had similar challenges, with a high illiteracy rate and a government education policy in relative disarray. During a recent visit by French FM Douste-Blazy to Rabat, the GOM had appealed to the GoF to expand French government schools in Morocco, from a current enrollment of some 15,000 to up to 30,000. Thibault complained that the GoF did not want to substitute for the GOM in educating Moroccans. Curmi added that the GoF's education assistance to Morocco was concentrated on basic education, and training teachers and public administrators. Unlike the U.S., GoF education assistance was not focused on curriculum reform or assistance to civil society or NGOs; the GoF was trying to win the confidence of those who set education policy to help foster improvements in basic education as a whole. Curmi concluded that the GoF and USG efforts in Morocco complemented each other well.

¶14. (C) In a brief exchange on democratization, Thibault cautioned against opening the Pandora's box of political Islam, particularly in Egypt. Thibault described regional governments as vehement in their insistence that moderate Islamists do not exist. He observed personally that Islamists were not a monolith, and that it may not be impossible to engage with those who share basic democratic values. Romanowski also updated Thibault on U.S. plans to move forward on initiatives to establish a regional Foundation and Fund for the Future; Thibault said the GoF would not oppose the Foundation or Fund initiatives, but noted that France's initial reservations about the foundation proposal when it was first floated in 2004 remained unchanged. The GoF preferred to concentrate on new EU

initiatives such as the Alexandria-based Anna Lindh Foundation and a new platform to promote Euro-Mediterranean NGO cooperation, based in Paris. Thibault and Curmi agreed with Romanowski that it would be useful to share analyses on NGOs in the region to determine which ones were worthy of support.

DISCUSSION WITH COOPERATION/GOVERNANCE OFFICIAL

15. (C) Herve Magrot, head of the MFA Directorate-General on International Cooperation (DGCID) Office on Governance, offered Romanowski a candid assessment of the GoF approach on reform issues during a wide-ranging discussion July 19. Magrot described the recent renaming of his office, from "institutional cooperation" to "governance," as a major positive shift. (Magrot quipped that in an earlier posting at the French UN mission in Geneva, he was regularly instructed to oppose references to "good governance" in CHR texts.) According to Magrot, the new GoF emphasis on governance resulted largely from DGCID discussions with NGOs, who complained that France was doing too much state-to-state cooperation. DGCID governance efforts focused on three main areas: financial governance, rule of law, and modernization of the state, to include improving administration and decentralization. While sub-Saharan Africa remained the largest recipient of DGCID governance funds, the Middle East/North Africa region had significant needs as well, and received some 5.6 million euros for governance in 2004. According to Magrot, the problem with NEA countries, especially those in the Maghreb, was that they were too close to France, which made it more difficult to establish strategic priorities. In the case of the Maghreb, the proliferation of cooperation initiatives by multiple GoF ministries created additional difficulties in prioritizing aid.

16. (C) Magrot reported that the top five recipients of French assistance in the NEA region remained (in descending order) Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon. (Note: These five countries received 91 percent of French development aid for the NEA region in 2003. End note.) Magrot observed that the GoF was trying to increase its governance activities in the Gulf region as well, and cited a DGCID-sponsored conference on justice in Qatar in October 2004. With the vast majority of DGCID funding determined by embassies in the field, Magrot stressed the importance of increased dialogue between U.S. and French missions on the ground, in order to better target our mutual assistance programs and reduce redundancies. Magrot cited the cooperation between French and U.S. ambassadors in Lebanon as a model to follow, though it remained the exception to the rule. Protectiveness over French language programs and commercial competition often led French diplomats in the field to eschew closer cooperation with U.S. counterparts. Magrot suggested that the U.S. consider sending more French diplomats on exchange programs in the U.S. in order to overcome ignorance or mistrust of the U.S. (Note: Magrot spent a tour in Washington as the NEA watcher at the French embassy in the 1990's. End note.) Romanowski suggested that the Marshall fellowship and NDU NESPA program could be of possible interest to French diplomats.

17. (C) According to Magrot, the most significant difference between the U.S. and French approaches on reform was the French emphasis on working with governments over civil society. Though the GoF did some work with civil society, its overwhelming focus remained on how to help Arab governments function better, which did not mean bigger government. Like his MFA colleagues, Magrot concluded that the U.S. and French efforts were highly complementary. Unlike his MFA colleagues, however, Magrot conceded that another difference between the U.S. and French approaches was the disconnect between assistance and political leverage in France. While the GoF had the technical capacity to offer governance assistance, it lacked the political will to push Arab governments to make implementation of such programs successful. For instance, the GoF had spent a lot training Egyptian journalists, but the lack of press freedoms in Egypt made it difficult for the journalists to use their new skills in a meaningful way. Since the U.S. had the political will to pressure Arab governments, Magrot suggested that the U.S. should devote more effort to working with governments, and not bypass governments in favor of civil society. Another disappointment cited by Magrot was Syria, where the GoF had launched one of its largest governance programs in the region, based on an earlier personal request from President Asad to Chirac to help Syria modernize its administration, judiciary, finance, and political system. The GoF sent two evaluation missions and delivered a number of reports to President Asad in 2003, but with the deterioration in GoF-SARG relations in 2004 over UNSCR 1559, Syria abruptly terminated the program. Romanowski observed that it could be useful to have deeper discussions on Syria, as waivers in restrictions on U.S. assistance might allow for limited MEPI funding of NGOs in Syria.

18. (C) Asked to explain the European Commission's (EC) reluctance to deepen dialogue with the U.S. on assistance to the region, Magrot said the problem had to do with the EC's relations with U.S., as well as the relationship between the Commission and member states. In terms of relations with the U.S., there was considerable dismay in Europe last year when the U.S. launch of the BMENA initiative was seen as downplaying and overshadowing the long-standing Barcelona Process, which led member states to push the EC to focus on protecting the independence of EU programs. Now, with the fear of the U.S. taking over EU programs no longer valid, member states could help encourage the EC to broaden exchanges with the U.S. on reform-related assistance. Magrot added that he viewed positively BMENA's moving beyond the G-8 context, as France had its own "issues" with the G-8 which further complicated its response to BMENA.

19. (C) In closing, Magrot described difficulties in the French education efforts in Morocco, noting that the GoF was overwhelmed by demands from the GOM and trying to help close the gap between well-educated elites and the masses. The issue was not merely educating more people but providing job opportunities for graduates; improving education without addressing lack of opportunity, in Magrot's view, would simply create better educated terrorists. He concluded that the GoF could "not do it alone" in Morocco and was trying to launch multilateral initiatives. He agreed with Romanowski that it would be useful to exchange papers on education programs in Morocco, and also concurred that further U.S.-GoF in-depth exchanges on reform-related assistance to Morocco and Egypt could be useful.

DGCID CONFERENCE ON DEVELOPMENT

10. (U) In a sign of more positive French engagement on BMENA issues, Romanowski was the only U.S. official invited to speak at a two-day annual DGCID global conference on international development (to be reported septel), at which she joined a July 19 panel on regional reform efforts with A/S-equivalent Thibault, EC Director for New Neighbors/MEDA issues Richard Weber, and Jordan-based UNDP representative Rima Khalaf. Before an audience of some 200 French development experts, cultural attachés, and NGO representatives, Romanowski explained the President's freedom agenda in detail, offering concrete examples of MEPI projects throughout the region and stressing the complementarity between the U.S. and European approaches. A/S Thibault, while cautioning that reform could not be imposed on the region by a Western front, put greater emphasis on democratization than usual and stressed the need to support modernizers wherever they may be, in government or civil society. Weber described EU reform-related efforts in the region as a comprehensive process, involving promotion of literacy/education, rule of law, and good governance. He also suggested that France broaden its focus on the region beyond the Maghreb. Khalaf, meanwhile, observed widespread agreement that reform must be home-grown, but questioned how inclusive the process should be, and whether it should include Islamists or Ba'thists, for example. She also called on the U.S. and Europe to expand the scope of assistance to the region to focus on freedom and knowledge deficits and status of women. Khalaf called on the EU to make better use of the Barcelona Process and for France to move beyond country-specific cooperation to a more regional approach, more like UNDP.

COMMENT

11. (SBU) The Romanowski visit was important in helping to move our dialogue with the French on BMENA issues towards a more constructive and pragmatic approach. Her discussions with GoF officials and briefing at the DGCID development conference helped dispel outdated misperceptions that the U.S. is seeking to impose reform on the region or to merge U.S. and EU initiatives. Post will continue to follow up with GoF officials, particularly in the DGCID, to seek greater information sharing on reform related programs in Morocco and Egypt, as well as encourage the GoF to take a more supportive approach to U.S. proposals for the Foundation and Fund for the Future. On the latter topic, more high-level Washington visitors on BMENA issues could help push the French toward a more constructive position in the run-up to the Forum for the Future in November. End comment.